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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 SKOPJE 000118

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TAGS: PREL PGOV MARR MK

SUBJECT: MACEDONIA: PRIME MINISTER ON ELECTIONS, NATO
ACCESSION, ICTY AND KOSOVO FINAL STATUS

REF: SKOPJE 104

Classified By: P/E CHIEF SHUBLER, REASONS 1.4 (B) & (D).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C/NF) PM Buckovski told the Ambassador February 1 that parliamentary elections likely will be held in late June/early July, and that he expects the opposition to use rough campaign and electoral tactics in trying to replace his government. On Macedonia's NATO accession prospects, he agreed the government must do more to coordinate anti-corruption efforts and to ensure aggressive prosecution of corruption cases. The GOM will ask the ICTY to delay the return of four potential war crimes cases until at least the end of 2006. Buckovski believes Kosovo final status should be determined "the sooner the better" in order to safeguard regional stability; he is convinced final status ultimately will end in independence. The GOM will keep its head down and guard up regarding allegations that Macedonia has assisted the USG in the "el-Masri" case that has captured local media attention. With the 2006 parliamentary elections in mind and campaigning about to begin in the next several months, Buckovski wants to portray himself as a pragmatic leader, and to ensure that none of his policy stances differs significantly from ours. End Summary.

PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN EARLY SUMMER, CONCERNS ABOUT OPPOSITION TACTICS

¶2. (C) During a dinner with Ambassador, DCM, DATT, and P/E Chief on February 1, PM Buckovski said parliamentary elections likely would be held in late June or early July to allow the next government to organize itself during the summer. The draft electoral code would enter parliamentary debate by the first week of March, with passage expected by mid-March. Buckovski, who was accompanied by his foreign policy and national security advisers, said he was hopeful the parliament would have passed important judicial reform laws (on the police and on the courts) before the election date.

¶3. (C) Buckovski said he was concerned that opposition center-right party VMRO-DPMNE would play a "destructive" role during the electoral campaign and elections. He cited recent demonstrations by unemployed tobacco workers from Kumanovo and Prilep, and ongoing street blockades by an NGO protesting government plans to privatize the state electrical power company, as typical examples of VMRO-DPMNE destabilization

tactics. (Comment: We agree there was a partisan political dimension to the protests, in addition to the underlying socio-economic complaints by workers and citizens. End Comment.)

¶4. (C) Noting VMRO-DPMNE objections to government plans to staff local election boards with civil servants, Buckovski said that previous elections had been marred by the appointment of political party members to those boards, which made the board members susceptible to manipulation and fraud. The government proposal would, he claimed, be more reassuring to voters, especially in primarily ethnic Albanian areas where fraud had typically been most prevalent. Ethnic Albanians would put more stock in the integrity of civil service professionals than they would in party representatives.

DPA'S RETURN TO PARLIAMENT

¶5. (C) Buckovski thanked Ambassador for her constructive role in persuading the ethnic Albanian opposition party DPA to return to the Parliament after a 9-month hiatus to protest irregularities during local elections last March and April (reftel). He said that he would welcome receiving DPA's suggestions for amendments to the draft electoral code, and would discuss those amendments the following day (February 2) with a DPA representative. During the conversation, Buckovski spoke by phone with DPA Vice President Menduh Thaci, and with Speaker of Parliament Jordanovski, to arrange for DPA's return to Parliament the week of February 6.

NATO ACCESSION

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¶6. (C) Ambassador briefed Buckovski on the upcoming visit by a high-level US delegation to review Macedonia's progress toward meeting its MAP goals. She said it would be important for Macedonia to demonstrate that it was a net contributor to security. The country had to convince some skeptical NATO members that bringing Macedonia into the Alliance would not be tantamount to "importing instability." Also, the GOM would have do more to combat corruption, including better coordination of existing anti-corruption efforts and more aggressive efforts to prosecute high-level corruption cases.

¶7. (C) Buckovski agreed that more needed to be done to fight corruption. He accepted the need for stronger coordination, and said Foreign Policy Adviser Mersel Biljali was in charge of "finding a methodology" for tackling the problem. Buckovski noted his personal ties to both the Public Prosecutor ("a friend") and the Minister of Justice (a former law student of his) and even offered personally to head the effort to improve coordination among the various judicial agencies to enhance anti-corruption efforts.

ICTY RETURN OF CASES -- REQUEST FOR DELAY

¶8. (C) Responding to the Ambassador's request for an update on the status of the return of four unindicted cases from the ICTY to Macedonian jurisdiction, Buckovski said that Chief Public Prosecutor Prcevski would meet with ICTY investigators in late February to ask orally for a delay in the return. Buckovski did not want a paper trail or any documentation of the request for a delay, since that could later be used by the opposition to attack the government for being soft on the ethnic Albanians (all four cases involved ethnic Albanians alleged to have committed war crimes during the 2001 internal armed conflict.)

¶9. (C) Comment: Buckovski's information was at odds with FM Mitreva's report to the EU Special Representative this week that Prcevski would travel to The Hague on February 2 to request the delayed return of cases. This discrepancy reflects the general lack of coordination on this matter between the Prime Minister, Mitreva, and the President -- the

only three GOM officials with the authority to make decisions regarding the return of cases. Buckovski reportedly told the press on February 2 that he expected the return of cases "to coincide with completion of the judicial reforms," and that the cases likely would be returned "by the end of 2006." End Comment.

KOSOVO FINAL STATUS

¶10. (C) On Kosovo final status, Buckovski said he could see no other possible outcome but independence. He said he agreed with the US position, that Kosovo final status should be determined "the sooner, the better" to reduce the potential for future instability in the region. As a positive example to Kosovo and the region of Macedonia's multi-ethnic experience, he said, the GOM planned to host in Ohrid in August the 5th anniversary commemoration of the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, which ended the 2001 internal armed conflict in Macedonia. Buckovski said he hoped for high-level representation at the event from those countries and organizations that had signed the original agreement, in particular the U.S. and EU.

EL-MASRI: STAY THE COURSE

¶11. (C/NOFORN) Concerning the case of a German citizen of Lebanese descent who has claimed that Macedonian authorities detained him in January 2004 and handed him over to the CIA for a rendition flight to Afghanistan, Buckovski noted that the GOM would stay the course and would continue to support the Minister of Interior, who has declined to discuss the matter with the local press. Buckovski was relieved to hear from the Ambassador that we would not shift course, either, and would continue to decline to discuss in public specific cases. The Prime Minister suggested that the Ambassador coordinate on the issue with the German Embassy in Skopje, suggesting that the Germans were putting pressure on the Macedonians to be more forthcoming. The Ambassador demurred.

TRILATERAL MEETING ALONG A-3 LINES

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¶12. (SBU) Buckovski mentioned that he was organizing a "trilateral meeting" in Tirana with his Albanian and Croatian counterparts (mirroring the Adriatic Partnership), and hoped the U.S. Ambassador in Tirana would be able to participate. He gave no specifics regarding the objective of the meeting, other than to mention that it would strengthen regional cooperation.

COMMENT

¶13. (C) Buckovski characterized the dinner as a chance to further strengthen the close cooperation between the Embassy and his office. He pledged "open and frank" communication between his office and the Embassy, and suggested Macedonia continues to view the U.S. as its single most important "strategic partner." Buckovski clearly was eager to get feedback on sensitive issues, and to portray himself as a pragmatic leader who can listen to arguments at odds with his own views, and who is ready to compromise when needed. With parliamentary elections likely in summer 2006 and the campaign season about to begin, Buckovski also feels it is necessary to show that he has international community support, especially from the US, and that his policy stances do not conflict with ours on any high-profile matters.

MILOVANOVIC